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A revised date for an Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles

Sometime “about 1875” Emily Dickinson wrote to Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield Republican, thanking him for a recent visit, and adding that, already, “We miss your vivid Face and the besetting Accents, you bring from Numidian Haunts”:¹

It was so delicious to see you – a Peach before the time, it makes all seasons possible and Zones – a caprice.

In the three-volume 1958 edition of her correspondence, the letter (numbered 438) is placed after two others from mid-April, and before another from mid-June, implying a date-range from mid-to late-April to early-to mid-June of the same year. In his 1960 The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, Jay Leyda made the range quite a bit narrower, suggesting “mid-May?”²

But Bowles’s own letters complicate this calendar. He was a busy man in the spring of 1875: his daughter Mary (“Mame” or “Mamie”) Dwight Bowles married William Harding King of Springfield in a private ceremony on April 3, and he accompanied the couple to New York on April 9 and 10 as they set off for Europe to enjoy an extended honeymoon. On April 17, he apologized to Susan and Austin Dickinson, the poet’s sister-in-law and brother, for not going to Amherst on April 19 for the latter’s birthday: he was busy preparing for a \$200,000 libel suit brought against him by the Springfield businessman and politician William Phelps. The trial began on April 27, and judgment was given on May 5, with Phelps awarded \$100 in damages. On May 10, Bowles travelled to New York and Philadelphia, returning on May 12; he planned to see his friend Charles Allen on May 15. Exhausted, he accepted an invitation to spend the week of May 22-7 resting in Woodstock, Vermont, with Mr. Billings.³ But perhaps the key document of this period is a letter of June 21 to Susan Dickinson, where he says “my head has been

¹ Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: 1958), 759. All references to letters are from this edition, and are given by number prefixed by L. Quoted material in this article is reprinted by permission of the publishers from The Letters of Emily Dickinson, Thomas H. Johnson (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, by the President and Fellows of Harvard College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson.

² Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), II, 233.

³ Most of this information is taken from Bowles Family Papers: Letters of Samuel Bowles III (1826-1878) to Charles Allen, 1870-77, “Merriam had these”, Part III: 1875-76. We are grateful to M. R. Dakin of Special Collections, Frost Library, Amherst College for sending a PDF of these letters, and for her contributions to the researching of this article.

uncommon [] since the trial [...] We see less & less of each other” – the implication being that he had not been to Amherst since the trial ended.⁴

An earlier date is another possibility. It is therefore interesting that Dickinson describes Bowles as bringing “besetting Accents...from Numidian Haunts”: though the location is not literal, it does suggest a warmer climate than that of New England, and a place that is associated in Dickinson’s imagination with Africa and the “Arabian Nights”. That place was the American South, for in early March Bowles returned from the latest of several extended trips to Washington, which was both a favorite winter destination of his and, in 1874-5, the venue for heated discussions in the United States Congress about the Force Bill, designed to protect African-American voters and statesmen from intimidation and violence.⁵ In a letter dated March 8 to Charles Allen, Bowles writes:

Mame and I got home from Washington and New York last Wednesday [March 3], and I have been very much oppressed with work and a cold ever since. Her wedding arrangements have been very nebulous until within three weeks, and altogether unsettled until today [...] The whole thing has hinged on their going to Europe; going, it would be early in April; not going, some time in May. Three weeks ago it was decided to go, and today, Mame and I settled on the 3d day of April at 12 M. for the marriage and a German steamer of the 10th for sailing. You are the third person, so far as I know, to have this information[.]⁶

One of the other two persons entrusted with “this information” was Maria Whitney, who dropped in on the Bowles family in Springfield the same day the wedding date was fixed.⁷ By this time, Whitney had also become a good friend of Dickinson’s.

The wording of Bowles’s letter matches in several places that of one he wrote to Susan Dickinson:

My dear Susan – I hope now to spend Sunday next with you – going by way of Palmer Saturday Pm [...] Since Washington I have been full of [illegible word] & a cold. The

⁴ Alfred Habegger, with Nellie Habegger. “An Annotated Calendar of Samuel Bowles’s Letters to Austin and Susan Dickinson.” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2002; 11: 2 (p. 40).

⁵ Bowles had been in Washington for several weeks in December 1874 as well, covering the passage of the Bill for the Springfield Republican. He opposed it, on the grounds that it represented Federal interference in State government.

⁶ Bowles Family Papers: Letters of Samuel Bowles III (1826-1878) to Charles Allen, 1870-77, “Merriam had these”, Part III: 1875-76, letter dated March 8th, 1875.

⁷ Letters of Maria Whitney to “Lizzie”, dated March 7th and 9th [1875] and “Jim”, dated Tuesday [March 9th, 1875], Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives, William D. Whitney Papers, box 22, folders 589 and 587. The conjectured date – “[1875 Feb]” – a curator penciled onto the manuscript of the letter to Jim is off by a month.

latter is just worn out. – Mame is to marry April 3, – no wedding; to sail for Europe on the German steamer of the 10th, & be back by the first of August.⁸

In “An Annotated Calendar of Samuel Bowles’s Letters to Austin and Susan Dickinson”, this letter is assigned to “14? Feb 1875”, but the March 8 letter to Charles Allen makes it clear that the date of Mame’s wedding had not yet been fixed in February: the letter to Susan, headed only “Sunday” by Bowles, must have been written about the same time as the one to Allen, but not before it, making Sunday March 14 the most likely date. If Bowles’s plans worked out as expected, he visited the Dickinsons on Sunday March 21, and Dickinson responded to that visit shortly afterwards. The date for L438 can, then, be reasonably revised from “about 1875” to “soon after March 21, 1875.”

The relationship between Bowles and Dickinson has been the subject of considerable, often erroneous, speculation – in part because of the faulty dating of her letters.⁹ Getting the dates right for Dickinson letters is therefore an important exercise, especially for L438, since it was only in 1874 that Dickinson had broken what is now recognized as an eleven-year gap in their correspondence, thanking Bowles for his kindness at the time of her father Edward’s death and funeral in June of that year.¹⁰ These letters sound a new note. In L438 the pronouns are scrupulously plural (“We” at the start of successive paragraphs and in a postscript; “us” five times elsewhere), showing that Dickinson now identifies Bowles first and foremost as a family friend (he was especially close to Susan and Austin, had admired Edward, and was gracious to Mrs Dickinson at the time of the first Thanksgiving after the latter’s death), and herself as the family’s representative in writing. Although there is no specific reference to the libel suit or Bowles’s many other problems in 1875, there is concern – Dickinson asks him to “rest the Life so many own.” But the opening of the letter also expresses an exuberant zest that is entirely personal: in addition to a characteristic “phosphorescence” that she relished, what Bowles brought on his early Spring visit was a foretaste of the ripeness of late Summer and the mythic South.

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⁸ Bowles, Samuel, 1826-1878. ALS to Susan Huntington Dickinson [Springfield, 1875? Summer?], Houghton Library, MS Am 1118.8.

⁹ It was assumed by some critics that Bowles must have been the “Master” referred to in letters 187, 233 and 248; but the first of these appears to date from spring 1858, by which time Dickinson and Bowles had not met. Alfred Habegger, My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Random House, 2001), 376.

¹⁰ Habegger, My Wars Are Laid Away in Books, 569-70.